Norton Vail reflects on 58 years of Boy Scouting

When Norton Vail joined the Boy Scouts of America at age 14, the scouting program was in its infancy. The birthday of American Boy Scouting is February 8, 1910, and it was 1918 when Norton joined Carbondale's Troop 2. Norton remained active with Troop 2 for the next 58 years, compiling more years of continuous active scouting than anyone in the Carbondale area.

The son of Samuel and Mary Norton Vail, (Copeland Ave.), Norton was baptised Samuel Vail, but he later changed his first name to Norton because, as Norton explained to the NEWS last November, "I was one of seven Samuel Vails in the family and it was confusing."

When the lanky youngster became interested in scouting, Carbondale had two troops – Troop 1 and Troop 2 of which Harry Hall was scoutmaster and George Iyoob, father of Simon Iyoob was committee chairman.

Norton recalls that he joined Troop 2 about the same time the old Carbondale High School burned. He was a freshman at the time.

Under the leadership of Harry J. Hall, Troop 2 purchased two lots at Fiddle Lake in 1930 and erected a camp mess hall. Most of the building materials were donated and the scouts themselves provided the labor. To raise money for the real estate and to purchase some of the building materials, the troop sold "Troop 2 Boy Scouts Lodge Bonds." Charles H. York, 14 Eighth Ave., explained that all scouts in Troop 2 had to buy one of the $10 bonds.

Additional money was raised by staging minstrel shows in Saint Rose Hall, a building which used to stand where the Saint Rosen of Lima Church rectory now stands. Several minstrel shows were presented in 1922 and 1923 and all were great successes. "Harry Hall arranged the shows," Norton said. "Harry was a good performer. His assistants were also very good." The assistant scoutmaster at that time was J.A. Colborn. Norton continued, "Charley York was one of the stars of the minstrel shows. His father had been in vaudeville and Charley was very talented."

The mess hall which the scouts built in 1930 was well constructed and still stands. "It was hard work," Norton recalled. "We were driving spikes into beechwood."

EARLY YEARS

When Troop 2 was first organized it was sponsored by the YMCA and met at there for a few years. It then left the sponsorship of the YMCA and held meetings in the Baptist Church until 1929. In that year the troop moved to the Odd Fellows Hall, the building that now houses Fortuner Upholstery on the corner Seventh Ave. and S. Church Street. In 1930 the troop moved into an old barn located behind Richardson's Bakery on N. Church Street, where the Baptist Church parking lot is now located, and meetings were held there until 1976 when the troop disbanded.

During his childhood and early years of manhood, Norton Vail worked for his father in the trucking business. That business evolved from Norton's grandfather's work. His grandfather was one of Carbondale's pioneers who ran a blacksmith shop in the barn that was later used as the troop meeting place. Some 800 young men were members of Troop 2 over the years and most would remember vividly the pot belly wood stove that heated that shed during the winter months.

The meeting room had "character" if nothing else. The wooden plank walls were decorated with Army surplus backpacks, plaster molds and animal tracks, patrol flags and insignia, and the ribbons won at various scouting events. There was no other place like it. The old shack with the red hot stove pipe would be considered a fire trap by today's standards. It was ironic, therefore, that buildings surrounding the sheds burned in a number of fires over a period of several decades, but the dilapidated wood building that housed Troop 2 stood until 1976 when it was demolished to make way for the Baptist Church parking lot. Norton joked that the only reason the old building survived was "Remember, the Lord was born in a stable!"

After working in the family trucking business, Norton accepted a job with the Department of Highways (later renamed Pennsylvania Department of Transportation – PennDOT) as a bridge designer. He kept that job for 35 years until he retired in 1976.

SCOUTING WAS BIG IN CITY

During the 1920s and 1930s the Boy Scouts movement was very popular. Earl Wilson, 9 Grove St., remembers that when he was 12 he tried to join Troop 2 but had to wait until he was 13 because there was a waiting list. Earl was a member of the troop in 1930 when they moved from the Odd Fellows Hall to the Barn. "We had eight patrols then – about 60 boys. Norton Vail was scoutmaster," Wilson said. "All of the patrols had Indian names, corresponding to the eight tribes of this area."

The number of scout troops in the Carbondale area grew by leaps and bounds. Ralph Dunn, 81-16th Ave., lived in Jermyn and joined Jermyn's Troop 1. He moved to Carbondale about 55 years ago and became associated with Troop 3 and has remained active in scouting for more than 50 years. "Saint Rose Church sponsored three troops, then Mt. Carmel sponsored a troop. Troops 11 and 12 were formed in Simpson," Dunn recalled. Earl Wilson and Ralph Dunn mentioned the names of other men who remained active scouters for more than 40 years – Angelo Mazza, Art Morcom, Clement Genovese, Footie Molinaro, Angelo Cerra, and Anthony Molinaro. Wilson, Dunn, and Morcom were active with Troop 3, while the other men have been involved with Troop 5, sponsored by Mt. Carmel Church. Ironically, this year Troop 5 will not renew its charter. Scoutmaster Earl Wilson says that there are not enough interested boys to justify a troop. Angelo Mazza, scoutmaster of Troop 5, said that the troop sponsored by Mt. Carmel Church now has only six or eight active scouts. Troop 8, sponsored by the Carbondale Kiwanis Club, has approximately twelve active scouts. They say that once registered over 200 Boy Scouts a year now numbers only 20.

Norton Vail recently said, "I lost interest in scouts when the boys lost interest. There are too many other things for kids to do now. Little League and school activities – there are lots of things that kids do now that didn't exist years ago."

DRUM AND BUGLE CORPS

Norton Vail became scoutmaster of Troop 2 in 1928. One of the first major projects he undertook was to create a drum and bugle corps. Robert Vandenberg, 73 Washington St., remembers vividly being recruited by Norton Vail to play a drum in the corps. "I wasn't quite old enough to join the troop at that time, but Norton asked me to play anyway," Vandenberg said. He joined the troop within the year and played in the band for several years.

It was 1931 when the band participated in their first parade. During the depression "National Recovery Act" parades were promoted by the government and Troop 2 scouts performed in cities throughout the northeastern Pennsylvania. According to Vandenberg, Norton Vail was the band leader and he taught the members how to play their instruments. "When I was in the drum corps, we had 43 musicians," Vandenberg said.

CAMPING

Troop 2 Scouts were avid campers. The boys made their own tents and cooking equipment. The tents were in three pieces so that each scout could carry a portion of the tent in his backpack. The tents were reassembled at the campsite.

To fire the wood burning pot belly stove, scouts used to hike to the top of Lincoln Avenue, chop down dead trees, and pull them with ropes to their meeting place. They built birdhouses, and even a sailboat for use at summer camp. There were skits, songfests, covered-dish suppers, window decorating contest, and competition among patrols. No Boy Scout ever complained about not have anything to do in Carbondale.

CUB SCOUTS

Boy Scouting was a program for boys who were at least 11 years old. In 1938, the same year Norton became scoutmaster, Cub Scout Pack 2 formed for boys aged 8 to 10. Joe Coogan was the first cubmaster. In later years, Norton became cubmaster as well as Scoutmaster. Every Monday evening was devoted to Boy Scouts and every Friday evening was spent with Cub Scouts. It was customary for a youngster to begin with Cub Scouts and continue with Boy Scouts for a scouting period of from seven to eight years under Norton's tutelage.

NORTON'S MINISTRY

Most people would find it impossible to squeeze in any other activities, but in addition to being Carbondale's most seasoned scouter, he was deeply involved in church work. He was a deacon and trustee of the Berean Baptist Church and eventually became an ordained minister. When the local pastor needed a substitute, Norton was the man to call on. The scoutmaster also filled in occasionally for Russ Edwards at the Waymart Baptist Church.

In 1959 Norton was asked to preach at the Baptist Church in Blooming Grove, Pike County. Norton told his wife, Alta Mae, that they would go for three Sundays and evaluate the church. The parishoners loved him and he remained their pastor for the next 17 years.

RETIREMENT

When Norton retired in 1976 he made the decision to leave the Carbondale area. He had driven through North Carolina a couple of years earlier and liked that area. After researching the weather bureau's records, he decided that Ashboro, N.C. would be the place he would call home.

Norton bought several acres of land in a rural area during the summer of 1976. He bought a house trailer and moved in onto his land near the site of the house he intended to build. For the past seven years he has been working on his house doing the carpentry, plumbing, painting, and even some of the masonry work himself.

Construction work on the house all but stopped in 1982 when Alta Mae Vail (the former Alta Mae Pierce) died after a prolonged illness. Now Norton sees no pressing need to finish the project, so he works on the house at a leisurely pace.

On February 4, Norton Vail celebrated his 80th birthday. In addition to building his house, he still enjoys gardening, is active in church work, and is building a studio in which he plans to take up painting. Scouting is no longer one of his primary activities. After 58 years of scouting (46 scoutmaster), he feels it's time to retire.

It is fitting that we pay tribute to the man who influenced the lives of more Carbondale are Boy Scouts than anyone else. Norton Vail – he's quite a guy!

Norton told the NEWS recently that he still keeps in touch with many of the men he once taught as scouts. He said that he enjoys following the progress his former scouts have made in life. Doctors, lawyers, generals, teachers, successful businessmen – he influenced all of their lives. We're sure they would all like to join us during National Boy Scout Week (February 5-11) in saluting Carbondale's most renowned scouter – Norton Vail.

NORTON VAIL stands in front of the house he has been building for the past seven years. At 80 years old, Norton still does the carpentry work himself. Norton's mailing address is RD 5, Box 230A, Asheboro, NC 27203.

TENTS MADE BY SCOUTS could be dismantled into three sections. Each scout would carry a portion of the patrol's equipment in his backpack. (Photo taken June 10, 1939 at Russell Park)

WOLF PATROL, June 11, 1938, included, front row, from left: William Fraser, Richard Stack and Hobart Thomas. Second row: Theodore LeVan, Thomas Ward, Robert Allen and Norman Neimeyer.

BEAVER PATROL, June 11, 1938, included, front row, from left: Ralph Atno, John Hopton, William Davis, Wilson Ramsay and Richard Monaghan. Second row: Douglas Lewis, Gerald Pittaway, Robert Neimeyer and Harold Kolansky.

JUNE 15, 1946 – Troop 2 scouts march in a parade on Lincoln Avenue. (Notice the brick pavement.)

CAYUGA PATROL, June 11, 1938, included: (front row, from left) Robert Lake, Arthur Golden, John Nelson, Harold Dippre and Hobart Thomas. Second row: Robert Dunlap, Charles Dunlap, Theodore Widmann, Charles Lyden and William Armstrong.

JULY 29, 1940 – Four scouts in front row are, from left: Howard Yepson, Harry McCullough, Dick Smith and Garfield Thomas. In second row are Bud Atno and Bill Ramsay.

AUGUST 15, 1938 – Assistant Scoutmaster Duane Armstrong (left) poses with Scoutmaster Norton Vail at Camp Hall.

Carbondale's Troop 2 was active unit

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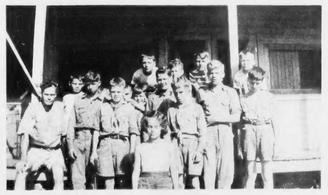
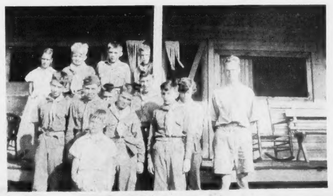
JULY 28, 1940 – Troop 2 scouts pictured from left are: E.J. Burns, Harold Kolansky, John Nelson, Charles Avery and Gerald Pittaway.



AUGUST 11, 1949 – Unidentified photo of scouts at Camp Hall, Fiddle Lake.

JULY 28, 1940 – Seated, from left: Fred Roberts, Harold Dipre, James Caldwell, and Harold Schwartztrauber. Standing: Jack Maxwell, David Jones, John Booth, Robert Lake, Dick Monaghan, and Kenneth Ulmer.



JULY 17, 1952 – Unidentified photo of scouts at Camp Hall, Fiddle Lake.

AUGUST 1947 – Unidentified photo of campers at Camp Hall, Fiddle Lake.

JULY 3, 1957 – Pictured at Camp Hall are, first row from left: Norton Vail, Donald Denny, Charlie York, George Cotrell, Harry Denny, Bob McCarthy, Robert Powell, Doug Vail and Norma Vail. Second row: Mike Lott, Kenny James, Al Calzola, Phil Heth, Joe Paveroni, Howard Piltz, Donald Powell, Jimmy Williams and John Holt.

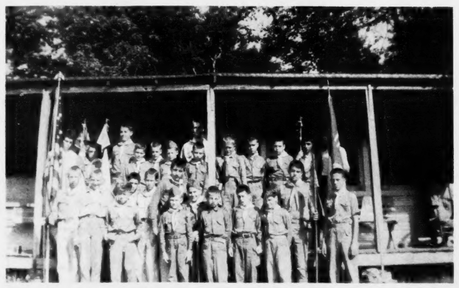
1938 HEADQUARTERS STAFF: John Hopton, Robert Vandenberg and Richard Mellow.

AUGUST 12, 1941 – Seated, from left: H. Dippre, R. Price, H. Schwarttrauber. Standing, J. Coogan, E. Burns, D. Jones, T. Widmann, C. Avery.

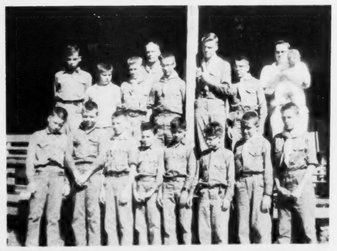
AUGUST 13, 1941 – Huron Patrol included, front row: F. Roberts, C. Brownell, B. Stephens. Second row: A. Llewellyn, G. Bates, R. Barth. Back row: W. Roberts and W. Jones.

1942 – Unidentified group of Troop 2 Scouts.

Photos from collection of Norton Vail



JULY, 1958 – Scouts camping at Camp Hall included: (front row from left) Harry Denney, Jerry Denney, George Cotell, Joe Burns, Jimmie Baker, Charlie York, Ralph Sisson, David York, Gary Mihalick, Billy McDonough, Al Calzola, Donnie Powell, and Russell Powell. Second row, Norma Vail, Tommy Coleman, Bobby Powell, Doug Vail, Kenny James, Howie Davis, Jimmy Tonkin, Louie Crocker, Bobby Parks, Howard Piltz, Anthony Rotella, June Vail, and Norton Vail in back row.



JULY 1962 – Unidentified photo of scouts at Camp Hall.